

Field Report

Rocky Mountain National Park

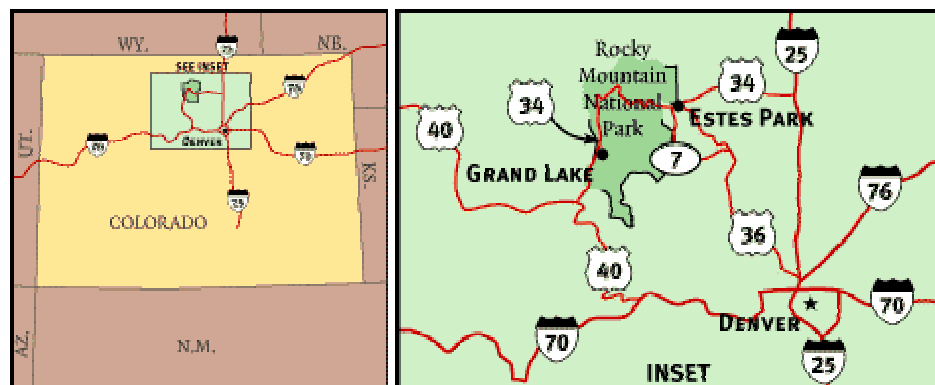
■ 1.0 Summary

Rocky Mountain National Park, located north of Denver, Colorado east and west of the Continental Divide, is a popular Colorado attraction (see Figures 1 and 2). Many day-users, from Colorado's Front Range and travelers from afar visit the Park. There is also a large contingent of visitors that spend longer periods in the area. Major attractions of the Park include Trail Ridge Road (U.S. Highway 34), camping in five campgrounds with nearly 600 camp sites, hiking on over 350 miles of trails, fishing in one of the many streams and lakes, and visiting the natural history museums and visitor centers. The Park has operated, through a concessionaire, a shuttle bus service that transports about 160,000 day-users per year between a shuttle lot and Bear Lake in order to relieve the parking and vehicular congestion that results from the popularity of the Bear Lake area.

Continuation of and improvement to this Alternative Transportation System (ATS) is recommended for this site as follows:

- Replace the currently used school busses with vehicles that enhance the visitor experience by making the ride more comfortable, fun, and informative;
- Provide vehicles that are accessible to disabled visitors;
- Consider creation of a Trail Ridge Road – Fall River Road loop for circulator ATS use; and
- Continue to explore options for linkage to future transit system in Town of Estes Park and the YMCA of the Rockies camp.

Figure 1 and 2. Park Location Maps



2.2 Administration and Classification

Rocky Mountain National Park was designated as a national park by Congressional action in 1915. The original legislation provided for an area of 358 square miles. Through the years additional area was approved for purchase by the NPS or donated to the Park, thereby expanding the area to over 415 square miles. The NPS works in cooperation with the Rocky Mountain Nature Association, the National Parks and Conservation Association, and the Conservation Fund, among others, to protect the area's resources and to provide for the visitors' experience.

2.3 Physical Description

Rocky Mountain National Park contains 415 square miles of mountainous land, containing over 110 peaks over 10,000-feet high and miles of river and stream valleys. The Continental Divide runs in a north-south direction through the Park. That line is a physical feature that separates the Atlantic and Pacific drainage basin within North America.

There are over 150 lakes in the Park and over 450 miles of rivers and streams that run through the Park. The Colorado, the Cache la Poudre, and the Big Thompson rivers all originate in Rocky Mountain National Park.

The Park's landscape includes forests and glacial moraines (see Figure 4). The forested lands are made up of stands of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, lodgepole pine, and aspen. These areas provide habitat for numerous varieties of species ranging from elk, deer, and bighorn sheep to smaller varieties such as marmot, picas, and squirrels.

Figure 4. View from Trail Ridge Road



2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Park

The law that established Rocky Mountain National Park in 1915 describes the Park's primary mission. The lands that comprise the Park are reserved as a public park for the benefit of the people of the United States. The regulations and management of the Park were to be directed toward the freest use of the Park for recreational purposes by the public and for preservation of the Park's natural conditions and scenic beauties.

Pressure by naturalists and area residents convinced the Congress to create the Park to halt the loss of wildlife, the cutting of timber, and the development of the scenic landscape for private and commercial use.

Rocky Mountain National Park has taken as their mission the responsibility to promote attitudes of stewardship towards park resources. The staff has been able to encourage active participation from park volunteers in maintenance, visitor services, and park interpretation activities to champion the Park's values.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Rocky Mountain National Park receives over three million visitors per year. The months of June, July, and August are the peak months. The typical park visitor stays less than a day but is within the vicinity of the Park for an average of four days. The park visitors are from around the country and the world. Many visitors however are Colorado residents.

Park information indicates that there are between 600,000 and 800,000 people classified as day-hikers, they use the many trails in the Park for recreation and nature study for less than a one-day hike (see Figure 5).

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Cross-country travelers will usually enter the Park at one location and leave through another. Regional residents that visit the Park typically enter and exit from the same entrance station, usually the east side of the Park. Because Trail Ridge Road is one of the few roads crossing the Rockies over a ridge, rather than through a valley, it offers a spectacular scenic drive. This is a unique experience and is a valuable interpretive opportunity in itself.

However, alternatives to private automobile use on the park road network, especially during the "summer vacation" peak period, must be considered. A Fall River Road/Trail Ridge Road loop by means of public transit should be considered as an alternative. There is interest in eliminating private automobile use from the dead-ending Bear Lake Road

during peak use periods. At the present time, school buses are used to shuttle visitors up the Bear Lake Road when parking lots are full (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Bear Lake Shuttle Staging Area



The town of Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park experience similar peak-period traffic congestion conditions. The Park and local governments have participated in joint planning activities and have sought funding through demonstration programs to alleviate congestion resulting from large numbers of private vehicles, autos and recreational vehicles, using the roads during the summer months.

Estes Park has had a trolley operating on the local streets, circulating between the YMCA camp and the town on a loosely scheduled basis. The system was locally supported and operated by a private contractor. Usage of the trolley system was not sufficient for the supporting merchants to continue their contributions and the town of Estes Park was not able to replace the merchant funding so the circulator service was eliminated. The local Chamber of Commerce and the town are investigating potential funding sources in attempt to reinstate the service.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Park, local governments and local merchant groups have participated in round-tables and planning activities to ensure that the three groups share common understanding of the transportation and economic development issues and are able to pursue common solutions to any problems.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

See following section.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Park has identified three areas or zones within the boundaries: the scenic viewing or drive-through zone, the day-use zone, and the primitive or backcountry zone. Most tourists experience the scenic viewing zone. Because the Park is easily accessible by two major east-west interstate highways with minor north-south connectors from the front-range cities, it provides the opportunity for a scenic drive loop for both cross-country travelers and regional residents.

The day-use zone is the area normally used in association with existing roads. Day-use activities include picnicking, hikes, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, snow-shoeing, wildlife observation, and interpretive activities.

The primitive-use or backcountry zone offers a range of experiences from total isolation in a trail-less area to a short walk-in experience. Activities include short- and long-distance hiking, backpacking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, and overnight tent camping.

■4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

The Park's GMP and Transportation Planning documents include the following recommendations:

- Eliminate private automobile use of the Bear Lake road during peak visitation periods.
- Create a loop, usable by public transportation vehicles, on Trail Ridge Road and Fall River Road.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

- The Park is working closely with the town of Estes Park, Larimer County, and the Colorado Department of Transportation in identifying transportation issues and potential solutions.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

Currently approximately 150,000 persons per year ride the Bear Lake shuttle. This is the maximum that can be accommodated under current contract requirements. The shuttle vehicles in use now are not handicap accessible. The route is approximately 4.5 miles at 9,000 feet above sea level on an eight percent grade.

Park personnel state that the road system within the Park is not designed and constructed so that it can handle the heavy impact of large tour buses; curves are too sharp. Road width is too narrow, and the road base is not sturdy enough. Trail Ridge Road and Fall River Road would need extensive improvements to enable their use for ATS purposes.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

- Replace the currently used school buses with vehicles that enhance the visitor experience by making the ride more comfortable, fun, and informative.
- Provide vehicles that are accessible to disabled visitors.
- Consider creation of a Trail Ridge Road – Fall River Road loop for circulator ATS use.
- Continue to explore options for linkage to future transit system in Town of Estes Park and the YMCA of the Rockies camp.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

Rocky Mountain National Park Master Plan, 1974.

Statement for Management, Rocky Mountain National Park, June 1992.

Site Visitation Records from the Public Use Statistics Office at <http://www2.nature.nps.gov/stats/index.htm>.

Rocky Mountain National Park Transportation Study, 1999.

Rocky Mountain National Park Visitor Use Study, 1998.

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Joseph R. Evans, Chief Park Ranger, Rocky Mountain National Park

Steve Stamey, AICP, Planning Director, Town of Estes Park